Interrogating Race:
Color, Racial Categories, and Class across the Americas

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ABSTACT

In 2012, *Racial and Ethnic Studies* published commentary and debate articles focused on the scholarship of Michael Banton and the utility of racial categories versus color scales for the study of social inequality. Banton interrogates the Latin American context in contrast to the U.S. arguing for the exclusion of "race" from analyses. We address various issues Banton raises, and on which Edward Telles, Peter Wade, and others comment, bringing to bear novel data that capture both color scales and racial categories in the U.S. and Latin America. In particular, we explore the mediating effect of parental education in color and race-category inequality. We find that its effect varies by country, and also between racial categories within some countries. The effect of parental education in the United States, though, appears smallest, while in other countries like Panama, our data suggest a much larger share of disadvantage is determined through the intergenerational transmission of parental social status. Overall we conclude that several of the posited divergences in the racial stratification processes at work in the US compared to Latin America may be overstated. Nonetheless, we believe that the best approach to analyze those systems could entail engaging racial as a multidimensional construct.

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In 2012, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (ERS) published a series of comment and reply papers in a symposium centered on an article by preeminent sociologist Michael Banton, "The color line and the color scale in the twentieth century" (Banton 2012; see also 2012b).[1] Banton's article takes issue with the "race" concept as embodied in racial categories (which he mostly refers to as color lines), arguing that these are inappropriate for analyzing processes of social inequality. In their stead, Banton argues that a skin color scale is the more appropriate scientific tool for understanding the effects of outward appearance (or phenotype) on socio-economic inequality. In order to illustrate his point, he critiques scholarship on Latin America in the work of Edward Telles (2004), but also of Peter Wade (2009), both prominent scholars of the Latin American region. Banton posits that their embrace of racial categories for understanding social dynamics in Latin America wrongly replicates US racial reasoning and makes it more difficult to untangle the effects of outward appearance on social differentiation and inequality.[2] Both Telles (2012) and Wade (2012) offer their responses as participants in the symposium, as we address below, along with other leading scholars (Hochschild 2012; Guimarães 2012; Van den Berghe 2012; Martiniello 2012; Virdee 2012; and Fox 2012).

The ERS symposium is a particularly illustrative example of decades of exploration and scholarly debate on the value of racial categories versus color continuums for examining social inequalities (e.g., Keith and Herring 1991; Telles and Murguia 1990), and specifically when comparing the United States to Latin

[1] For ease of readability, we will use the US English spelling of "color" (not "colour") throughout, even for quotations.
[2] See debate in Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) and Telles (2003) on the importation of US concepts of race into the Latin American context.

America (e.g., Harris 1964; Degler 1974; Noguiera 1985; Davis 1991; Skidmore 1993; Bonilla-Silva 1994). At the root of the supposed differences between these broad regions are diverging colonial histories, one Anglo and the other Iberian. Though scholars disagree exactly why and how that difference matters (e.g., Tannenbaum 1947; Degler 1971; de la Fuente 2010; Guimarães 2012; Stamatov 2015), the colonial cleavage does map onto diverging processes of how states intervened in the relationship between social inequality and outward appearance, i.e., in racial formation (Omi and Winant 1994; Marx 1998).

Two state-led differences appear especially key: 1) the US state's embrace of the rule of hypodescent as foundational to its racial schemes (in contrast to Latin American states) (Davis 1991; Nobles 2000); and 2) the U.S. state's extensive use of racial categories for legalized discrimination from Reconstruction into the 1960s (mostly absent in post-abolition Latin America) (Marx 1998). Research posits that these differences produced at least two important contrasting social dynamics in the US and Latin America. First, discrete racial categories are generally accepted as the appropriate constructs for understanding racial inequality in the United States, whereas a more ambiguous color scale appears to organize social inequality in Latin America (Skidmore 1993; Reis 1997). Second, racial categories operate more independently of class for determining social status in the U.S. (i.e., the US earlier as a racial caste system), whereas color is just one component among others of social status in Latin America (Wagley 1963; Davis 1991).

Scholars actually agree on many of these differences (Banton 2012; Telles 2012; Guimarães 2012), but until very recently there have been no comparative quantitative data that include both skin color and racial categories to test this divide. In this paper, we engage the debate in the *ERS* symposium, bringing to bear novel

data from 19 nationally representative samples capturing skin color as well as racial categories as measures of population diversity in both the U.S. (GSS 2012)[3] and Latin America (AmericasBarometer 2014). Our goal is to test the comparison between the color scale versus racial category divide, and specifically to examine how social origins may modify the relationship of color and racial categories to socio-economic status. Scholars argue that the intergenerational transmission of social status from parent to child plays a central role in shaping an individual's outcomes, even moreso that adulthood opportunities and fair treatment (Duncan 1967; Mare 1981; Hout 2015). Our analysis seeks to: 1) examine the extent to which the effects of color and of racial categories are independent of social origins, and 2) examine the heterogeneity across countries in the degree to which social origin helps us understand color and race-based inequality, paying specific attention to a possible regional divide (US versus LA). In doing so, we hope to contribute to the growing line of research on the multidimensionality of what the field labels "race" by beginning to disentangle categories, color, and class background.

Racial Categories versus Color Scales

As a window into many of the issues surrounding the color scale versus racial categories debate, we begin with a more detailed examination of dueling perspectives elaborated in the *ERS* symposium. As mentioned, Banton's focal article argues strongly against the use of "race" as a concept in the social sciences. In his approach, "race," "color line," and "racial categories" are synonymous. Some of his reasoning for rejecting race is familiar: it is a social construct based on a US folk vision of human diversity, it has no basis in biology, and it hampers cross-national comparison due to its varying localized meanings. Hence, Banton argues

[3] The release of GSS 2014 data is imminent; at that release, we will update the US analysis.

that it should be excluded from sociological analyses, a perspective shared by others (e.g., Hirschmann 2004). Instead of "race," Banton prefers a skin color scale as a measurement of human diversity when the goal is to understand "racialized" difference in social entitlement.

Color scales and racial categories are both ascribed characteristics, and the importance of both lies in their involvement in the constitution of social entitlement. According to Banton, from the perspective of a color scale, "individuals are ranked by socio-economic status with complexion as one of the constituent elements that is taken into account." In contrast, in US society marked by a color line, "individuals are divided into distinct social [racial] categories of differential entitlement." Why is a color scale better? He writes, "The color scale is the primary form of differentiation on the basis of outward appearance." Hence, according to Banton, "the drawing of a color line marks a breach in that scale" (1111). "When the idiom of race is employed, it recognizes discontinuities (or creates them), whereas the idiom of color recognizes a continuity or difference" (1112). Moreover, an important sociological problem arises, according to Banton, in that many scholars "assume that the attribution of social significance to differences of color is better described as racial distinction" (1116).

In addition and importantly, unlike racial categories, Banton posits that skin color can be measured "objectively." He offers the example of measurement by photospectrometer (p. 1112; see Hill 2002). Race cannot be so easily captured; it is "invisible" and also "unmeasurable" with the same objectivity as skin color (p. 1228). Color, then, represents a more straightforward continuum of human variation across societies, and hence is not prisoner to the localized meanings of distinct racial categories across contexts. In sum, according to Banton, racial

categories are culturally-biased constructs, whereas a color scale circumvents much of that bias.

Due to his unfavorable perspective on race as an artifact of U.S. scientific racism, and on his view regarding the need to move beyond race categories toward a color continuum, Banton objects to what seems to be the opposite trend in Latin America: movement away from color scales as meaningful descriptors of diversity and toward discrete racial categories. He is right about this trend, as clearly documented in Loveman's (2014) expansive historical study of the Latin American region through the lens of changing racial classification schemes and state practices across two centuries, but most specifically in the last two decades (see Bailey 2008). The reasons scholars offer to account for this movement from color to race in Latin America vary greatly, from social movement mobilization and increased racial consciousness, to state intervention via race-targeted policy, to requirements of international funding agencies, such as the World Bank, to the intervention of international human rights organizations and actors, and to US academic and cultural influence (Telles 2004, 2012; Banton 2012; Bailey 2008; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Guimaraes 2012; Loveman 2014).

As party to this move from color to race in Latin America, Banton's specific critique of Edward Telles (2004) focuses on his tendency to conflate racial categories and skin color, treating these as interchangeable. For example, Telles writes with regards to Brazil, "Color [in Portuguese] captures the Brazilian equivalent of the English language term race" (2004: 79); "We could exchange the words race and color and we could come to the same conclusions" (Telles 2012: 1166). Hence, Telles makes no issue of framing the study of social dynamics affected by outward appearance or phenotype in Brazil as "race relations." Although

some of Telles' writings do appear to confirm Banton's characterization of his scholarship, Telles' position is more complex, as he notes in his reply to Banton (Telles 2012) and to which we return in our Discussion section. Nonetheless, for Banton, only one of these concepts is useful, so it would be an error to treat them as interchangeable, and doing so merely extends a folk concept from the US and entangles the Latin American context (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999).

Banton's critique of Wade (2009) goes a bit further than that of Telles. Instead of conflating color scales and race categories, Banton charges Wade with a wholesale embrace of and racial categories as more appropriate for scientific analysis in Latin America than color scales. In contrast to Telles' reply to Banton, in which Telles contests the latter's characterization of his work, Wade (2012) defends his preference for the use of racial categories in Latin America. He views color as "too narrow" in that race has to do with other physical features (like hair) and cultural traits. In contrast to Banton's criticism that the scientific use of race is born of a US folk concept, Wade views "race" as "global in scope" and "more powerful that skin color" (p. 1171). Wade concludes that "A focus on skin color might well alert us to the fact that a darker skin color may be the target of discrimination in Latin America, but it would not alert us to the differences between people classed as *índio* and *negro* (or indeed mestizo or *pardo*), who happen to have the same skin color. To achieve this, we need to be alive to what I would call racial categories" (1172).

Social Class and Outward Appearance

Key to Banton's view of the appropriateness of a color scale in Latin America versus racial categories is the belief that in Latin America, an individual's position on a color scale is but one characteristic, among others, that comes into play in

deciding social entitlement or status. Primary among those determinants in Latin America is social class (Wagley 1963; Telles 2004; Schwartzman 2007 Torche 2014). This is in part a reflection of the fact that Latin America is the world's most unequal region, and it has been at least since the 1960s (Torche 2014: 620; see de Ferranti et al. 2004). Legacies of the past weigh heavily in that context, and hence social mobility is low. In the U.S., in contrast, class inequality is much less than in Latin America, and upward social mobility is greater (Behrman et al. 2001). Social mobility, though, may be less fluid for particular subpopulations in the US, like African Americans, for whom racial category membership may be more determinative of social status and hence operate more independently from other components, such as class (Blau and Duncan 1967; Davis 1991; Wacquant 2004).

In seeking to understand how race and color in the US and Latin America may operate differently in relation to social inequality, using the lens of intergenerational mobility may be particularly illuminating. This concept addresses "the association between the socioeconomic standing of parents (origins) and that of their adult children (destinations)" (Torche 2014: 624). In fact, intergenerational mobility is one of the most important current questions in the study of social mobility in the United States (Hout 2015; Torche 2011; Mare 2011) and in Latin America (Torche and Spellman 2009; Torche 2014). According to Hout (2015), "We ask about mobility because we care about opportunity and fairness and think if society provides opportunity and does so fairly, then more people will move up as time goes on" (Hout 2015: 28). Hout explains, though, that social mobility may have much more to do with the conditions and circumstances of early life than on opportunities and fair treatment in later life. The centrality of early life circumstances, or social origins, is posited by Mare (2011) as well who holds that to

fully understand social stratification and population change, we need to “transcend individual lives” and to “transcend coresident nuclear families” in our analyses (p.1-2).

This intergenerational approach often frames determinants of social mobility as falling into two broad categories, circumstances and efforts. While the latter refers to those things over which an individual has some control, such as educational achievement or occupational choice, circumstances are those beyond the individual’s control, such as race, region, and social origins (Torche 2014). The effect of circumstances, and specifically social origins, on racialized inequality has been more thoroughly studied in the US relative to Latin America, where data are lacking. Early studies on the US posit, for example, that the social origins of African Americans was trumped by racial category membership as the strongest determinant circumstance for social mobility (Blau and Duncan 1967). This scholarship suggests the earlier all-encompassing character of race in the U.S., similar to caste status, at least for African Americans. (Warner 1967; see also Wacquant 2000 on the racial caste system in the U.S.).

New studies of social mobility in both contexts, though, show that the US and Latin American context may not differ much regarding social mobility in relationship to social origins. In both regions, parental education is shown to be especially important for social mobility in the last two decades. It is not that racial categories or color are necessarily beginning to matter less in Latin America or to matter more independently from other components determining social mobility, but to the enduring importance of class. According to Torche, there is a consensus in recent studies of social mobility in Latin America showing that “parental education is the most influential circumstance; ethnicity [race] and region of birth have smaller

roles" (2014: 633). In contrast, the movement towards a convergence on the important of parental education is most clearly on the US side. Scholar posit that the intergenerational effect of parental education has replaced the dominance of race for determining social mobility (Marrero and Rodriguez 2011).

Interestingly, Banton (2012) too notes movement in the process of racial stratification in the U.S. towards becoming more similar to Latin America in that color lines are looking more like a color scale (1121-1123). This perspective on shifting racial stratification dynamics in the U.S. is clearly supported by other sociologists, most notably, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2004). Bonilla-Silva writes of the Latin Americanization of the US racial stratification system, by which he means that a color scale, rather than racial categories, is slowly becoming more important in shaping social inequality in the U.S. It is not clear, though, what is causing this shift and whether or how much it has to do with the increasing importance of parental origins relative to ethno-racial ascription. In turn, others write of Latin America becoming more like the U.S. through a fading of class formation beginning in the 1990s and a "resurgence of race" (Guimarães 2012:1161). On the issue of the growing importance of race in Latin America, scholars generally hold one of two conflicting perspectives: 1) Latin Americans are becoming more aware of the operation of a color line (white versus nonwhite), i.e., they are becoming more racially aware and less color blind (Guimaraes 2012) or 2) the state (and other actors) are helping to constitute the racial populations that seek to address or administrate (Loveman 2014).

In sum, one of the key questions in understanding contemporary inequality is the degree to which color and racial category differences are accounted for by the legacy of historical discrimination and parental class (an individual's class origin),

and how much of the race and color inequality that we observe is created in contemporary society independent of class origins. In addressing this question, we investigate whether the US and Latin America actually differ in the degree to which social origin accounts for color and racial inequality (speaking to differential stratification systems in the US versus Latin America). To interrogate these questions, we estimate the gross effect of both racial categories and color scales on per capita household income across 19 countries of the Americas, including the United States. We then compare these results to estimates from models that control for the social origins of respondents in the 19 countries, allowing us to observe how much change there is in color and race inequality when we account for social origin.

Data and Methods

Our data are from the 2012 General Social Survey (GSS 2013) in the United States and the 2014 AmericasBarometer (AB 2014) surveys in Latin America. The 2012 GSS is a nationally representative probability sample of U.S. adults, ages 18 and over, living in households. Since 2010, the biennial survey has employed a rotating panel design that includes a new cross-sectional sample and re-interviews of randomly selected members of the two previous survey waves. Our analyses include the full sample for 2012, which surveyed 1,974 people. Of these, 1,712 were interviewed in person (as opposed to over the telephone).

AB is part of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). Our analysis focuses on 18 countries from the following regions: Mexico/Central America, Andean/Southern Cone, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. The country surveys are nationally representative, face-to-face interviews of voting age adults. Sample sizes are approximately 1,500, with the exception of Bolivia, which is approximately 3,000. Samples in each country were developed using a multi-stage probabilistic

design, and were stratified by major regions of the country, size of municipality, and by urban and rural areas within municipalities.

In all surveys, interviewers rated respondent skin color after concluding their interview using similar 10-point (GSS) or 11-point (AB) scales with visual color referents. Interviewer field manuals included a color card in the U.S. with 10 circles of varying skin colors, each corresponding to one of the points on the color scale. Similarly, the AB surveys used a color card with 11 color shades corresponding to points on a color scale. The color cards were not shown to respondents.

With regards to racial categories, GSS respondents were asked to self-identify their race in response to the question: “What is your race? Indicate one or more races that you consider yourself to be.” Up to three responses were recorded using the 15 categories used in the U.S. Census. Immediately prior to reporting their race, respondents were asked: “Are you Spanish, Hispanic or Latino/a?” Based on responses to these questions, we recoded respondents into the most commonly used, mutually exclusive racial categories for the United States.

The racial categorization variable in the AB survey was also based on self-identification. Respondents were asked: “Do you consider yourself white, *mestizo*, indigenous, *negro*, *mulato* or other?” In all countries, the first part of the question [“Do you consider yourself…”] was the same, but the response categories differed according to country schemes. For example, the Brazilian survey (in Portuguese) used national census categories: white, *pardo* (brown or mixed), *preto* (black), *amarelo* (Asian origin), and indigenous. Other variations include Venezuela, which uses the term *moreno*, and Guatemala, where only the categories *Ladino* and Indigenous were used.

To capture social origin, we focus on mother's education (Torche 2014; Hout 2015). Social origin is a concept that focuses on "conditions and circumstances of early life" (Hout 2015:28) that are inherited across generations. Class status, like racial status is often considered to be ascribed at birth. Using mother's education to capture class status allows us to control for advantages (and disadvantages) accumulated from parents' class position. While we would ideally include other indicators of parental class as well, such as father's education and parents' occupation (cf. Hout 2015), we focus on mother's education because it allows us to retain a broad international perspective. Information about parental occupation, for example, was only available in two of the countries in the AB data, and only partially.

We chose per capita household income as our dependent variable. Although measures like hourly wage (net of overtime pay) can better address issues around discrimination, household income is a better measure for understanding inequality more broadly as it includes differences resulting from factors like assortative mating (see Torche 2011: 774; Darity and Mason 1998). Hence, according to Torche (2011), these attributes make total family income "perhaps the best measure of economic well-being" (p. 774) and specifically oriented toward capturing the "the transmission of advantage across generations" (p. 774). Household income is self-reported in the GSS using a list of 25 categories. Respondents are instructed to answer based on their "total family income, from all sources" for the previous calendar year. We recoded each category to its midpoint with the exception of the open-ended top category, which we assigned a value of $160,000 based on the same formula, described below, that we applied to each country in the AmericasBarometer data. (This coding will understate self-identified race or color

inequality to the extent that “whites” and lighter skinned Americans are overrepresented in the top category and have incomes substantially greater than $160,000.) We then used the count of persons in the respondent’s household to calculate per capita income. Household sizes ranged from 1 to 10. [4]

The income measure in the Latin American surveys is self-reported using 16 intervals based on each country’s currency. Respondents were instructed to answer based on “the total monthly income of this household, including remittances from abroad and the income of all the working adults and children.” For each country we assigned midpoint values to the first 15 intervals, and assigned the open-ended top category a value corresponding to the top value of the penultimate category plus half of the penultimate category’s range. To calculate per capita income, we used the count of persons in the respondent’s household, ranging from 1 to 20.[5]

To examine differences in per capita household income across racial categories and skin color scales, as well as the degree to which social origins mediate these effects, we use ordinary least squares regression and four models regressing per capita household income on combinations of three predictor variables across our 19 countries: 1) color alone; 2) color and mother’s education; 3) racial categories alone; and 4) racial categories and mother’s education. Our approach is intended to highlight the overall level of per capita household income inequality and its relationship to color, race, and class at a broad comparative level across 19 countries. Hence, we do not control for other factors through which racial inequality might be mediated or reproduced in a given setting. Those considerations,

[4] The GSS is designed to be self-weighting at the household level; however, we employ weighted estimates in all of our analyses to account for both non-response and selection based on the number of adults in the household. Unweighted results were substantively similar to those presented here.

[5] There are a small number of households larger than 20; we collapsed 20-31 as 20.

such region, education, and marital status, are important for the purposes of identifying additional intervening factors, but our aim in this study is not to isolate a complete list of country-specific mechanisms through which racial inequalities arise. Introducing additional variables would cloud the analyses, and make our broad comparison difficult to interpret (cf. Hout 2015). For example, controlling for education would mean that we would be unable to differentiate between countries where there is no racial inequality and countries where there is substantial racial inequality, all of which is mediated by education.

We presents our results in four graphs. In a first, we graph predicted values of per capita household income for each point on a country's skin color scale, for points with 30 or more cases. Skin color category four serves as our benchmark in each country; we present all other average incomes in relation to the value for that mid-range color point. Beside each vertical row of each country's predicted income by color point, we graph a second row of color points representing predicted values for color controlling for mother's education. This permits a visual of the differential impact of inherited class on color for income stratification. In a second graph, we do the same with racial categories for each country, excluding racial populations represented by fewer than 30 respondents.[6] Again, we include a second vertical row controlling for social origin control. In two more graphs, we highlight the degree to which social origins account for race and color inequality by graphing the change in the strength of the coefficients for color and race alone and controlling for social origins.

Findings

[6] Our threshold of 30 cases, which is to obtain more robust results, tends to exclude the very lightest and the very darkest color points in most of countries, as well as some small racial categories.

The graphed results of our regression models reveal several interesting aspects of how color and race operate in Latin America and the US, and the possible mediating role of social origins. In our first graph, Figure 1, we see that for each country there are two rows of plotted color points. The first vertical row in each country's column represents the average predicted value of per capita household income for each color point along a color scale of lightest to darkest. The y-axis measures percent difference in predicted per capita income for all color points relative to color category 4. (Color category 4 is the reference point represented by 0 on the y-axis.) For example, in Argentina, we see that the lightest color point (with 30 or more cases) is at the highest position on the income scale. Argentines rated that color by interviewers have household incomes approximately 40% greater on average than Argentines rated 4 on the skin color scale. In contrast, the darkest color point reveals an income about 35 percent less than the lighter color category 4.

[Figure 1 about here.]

Looking broadly at the first row for each of the countries in the graph reveals many striking similarities, but also differences. All but three countries (Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama) provide evidence of some association of lighter color with higher per capita household income.[7] Argentina and Mexico exhibit a strikingly a linear relationship between color and household income. In other countries, some color points are clustered, suggesting that there are parts of the color continuum where variation in matters less than others. The case of the United States and Brazil are illustrative, as several darker color points have similar household incomes.

[7] Color categories in Honduras, Costa Rica, Peru, Paraguay, and Venezuela tend not to be statistically significant.

The second row of color points in each column represents predicted household income controlling for mother's education. If social origins play an important role in mediating the effects of skin color on household income, as Banton and others suggest is the case in Latin America, we would expect that the second row color points will be substantially closer to the zero line. Contrary to that expectation, our figure suggests that skin color differences are not substantially reduced by controlling for maternal education, so that the color differences with and without this control are relatively similar. The US does not seem to be an exception to this broader Latin American pattern.

Figure 2 provides additional information on the degree to which controlling for maternal education changes the color coefficients by graphing the relative change in the coefficient for color when maternal education is introduced as a control.[8] This method more succinctly summarizes how color inequality in household income is impacted by controlling for social origins, and this varies across the Americas. The country that shows the smallest impact of social origin on the relationship of color to income inequality is the United States. In the US, there is a 7 % difference between the gross effect of color and the effect of color controlling for maternal education. While the US exhibits the smallest change, it is important to note that it is not categorically different from other Latin American countries in the degree to which maternal education reduces the color gradient in household income. Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Nicaragua all see reductions in the magnitude of their color gradient when controlling for maternal education that are relatively similar to those observed in the US. At the other end of the spectrum, Figure 2 shows that social origins has a greater impact color inequality in countries

[8] In these models we treat color as a continuous variable to simplify presentation.

like Chile, Costa Rica, Peru, and Panama. Chile, however, like Honduras, has relatively little color-based inequality to begin with, so the changes that are observed in these countries when maternal education is introduced should be interpreted cautiously. Honduras is a clear outlier; however, the color coefficients for that country, both with and without the social origin control, are not statistically significant.

[Figure 2 about here.]

Turning our attention to how racial categories operate across the Americas, in Figure 3 we plot each racial category's predicted per capita household income relative to the mestizo category (multiracial in the US and Ladino in Guatemala). In examining the first vertical row of categories, many of the color scale patterns we saw in Figure 1 are well-reflected in racial category hierarchies in Figure 3. This suggests that color is a primary element in ethno-racial category construction, with some exceptions (Wade 2012; Guimarães 2012). Overall, white racial group privilege relative to other racial populations is clear in all but seven countries: the U.S., Chile, Honduras, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Nicaragua, and in many of these, whites are still near the top.[9]

For those countries for which their color scales estimated in Figure 1 do not seem to closely match an expected racial category hierarchical configuration in Figure 3, one plausible explanation is that this disconnect is evidence of the broader meaning of race, and the more narrow meaning of skin color with regards to outward appearance (Wade 2012; Guimarães 2012). That is, for example, in the US, the skin color of Asian Americans actually measures as slightly darker than that of

[9] In the US, for example, whites trail Asians, but are substantially higher than all other groups, and we see a similar pattern in the Dominican Republic where whites trail mulatos, but rank above other groups. In Chile, all except the indigenous population are relatively similar. In Guatemala, there was no white category, and Ladinos generally occupy the top of the racial hierarchy, as our results show.

white Americans, but the Asian racial category may capture more than color and stands in a position of privilege relative to whites in the US (although in our sample the difference in per capita household incomes between these two populations is not statistically significant). Likewise, the lower status of whites in El Salvador, Mexico, and Nicaragua probably evinces the broader character of racial categories compared to skin color in relation to the income gradient.

[Figure 3 about here.]

Regarding the degree to which racial inequality can be accounted for by social origin, Figure 3 echoes Figure 1 in that it suggests that race differences remain substantial even after accounting for maternal education. That is, the second row of racial categories mirrors fairly closely the first row across all countries. Figure 4, though, shows that there are some, albeit somewhat limited, reductions in the racial gaps when we control for maternal education. Similar to Figure 2, Figure 4 plots relative change in the coefficients for each racial category by country when controlling for social origins. At the far left of the graph, we see that in the US, the black and Latino gaps (relative to multiracials) are ever so slightly larger when we account for education than when we do not. By contrast, the white and Asian advantages are somewhat reduced, and the reduction is similar to the levels observed in the race gaps in the other countries we examine, at 5 percent.

[Figure 4 about here.]

We also see that there is a group of countries in which social origins matters, but very similarly for the context's various racial groups: Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic. Interestingly, most of these happen to be the countries with the largest percent white populations, as

noted by their position along the x-axis. Though previous research highlights that there is variation in the effects of social origins across different racial populations, we see that the reduction in the race gaps that stems from accounting for maternal education is quite similar. Another pattern that is noteworthy is that in many countries (e.g., Guatemala, Ecuador, Mexico, and Bolivia) accounting for social origin matters less for the indigenous than for other categories. In general, controlling for maternal education does little to change the race gaps that we observe, in most countries, accounting for somewhere on the order of 3 percent of the gap, potentially up to 5 or 7 percent. One notable exception is Panama, where maternal education plays a substantially larger role in accounting for the racial gaps that we observe, accounting for about 15 percent of the race gaps. This suggests that in Panama, more so than in other countries, racial privilege is attributed to the social advantages (and disadvantages) passed on through maternal education. One might speculate that this indicates that racial differences in Panama are more directly related to social origins, while in other countries these historically produced inequalities are more actively recreated in current society.

Overall, results suggest that both color and racial category are useful for understanding racialized inequality in the Americas, that they interact in varying ways with social origins, and that our understanding of inequality can change rather dramatically depending on whether we use a color scale or racial categories. Take Mexico as an example. Using a color scale, we view a relatively linear relationship of color to household income; using racial categories, whites fall slightly below whites along that income continuum. What's more, while darker colors may represent disadvantage in many most countries, a color scale can actually obfuscate indigenous disadvantage. Whereas indigenous in Colombia, for example,

may be lighter than blacks and mulattos, the racial category hierarchy reveals that they rank well below them in income disadvantage. Likewise, in Bolivia and Mexico, the skin color differences of Indigenous may not differ much from mestizos (see Wade 2012), though they occupy a much lower rung on the racial hierarchy than do mestizos. Hence, it is clear that there is a trade off in some contexts on whether racial category or color scales best capture inequality.

Discussion

We began this paper by interrogating the issues debated in *ERS*'s 2012 symposium on race and color, focusing on the scholarship of Michael Banton, a leading sociologist of racial and ethnic dynamics. The issues he raises have been debated by scholars for decades, and these debates will likely continue to define the field. His central points that we empirically examine are: 1) the relative value of racial categories and color scales for explaining social inequality in the United States and in Latin America, and 2) whether and to what extent social origins mediate these relationships.

At the broadest level, we provide evidence for the utility of both race and color in analyses of social inequality in both Latin America and the United States. It can no longer be argued that there is a simple dichotomy, that for interrogating social stratification, color scales are best in one region and racial categories in the other. Rather, our results make it clear that instead of generalizing about two regions, we must go to the country level to discern the utility of these social constructs for understanding inequality. For example, a color scale maps onto household inequality in Argentina and Mexico, but does not in Costa Rica or Honduras. Race categories clearly reveal the disadvantage of most countries' indigenous populations, while in others they fail to capture meaningful variation

(e.g., in Colombia for whites, mestizos and mulattos). Still in others, the use of racial categories, instead of capturing white privilege, reveal apparent non-white racial group advantage (e.g., in the U.S. and in Nicaragua).[10] These patterns are both variegated and revealing, and we suspect that future research disaggregating further to examine regional variation within countries will reveal similar heterogeneity within countries, highlighting the importance of understanding racial categories and color scales in both regional and local context.

Regarding social origins, overall our results show that they matter in the relationship of both color and racial categories to social inequality, though perhaps less than one might have expected, with cross-country and region variation. Here it is perhaps most interesting to note that while maternal education typically accounts for no more than 7 percent of the race gaps that we observe, they reduce the color gradient much more substantially. Given that we only look at one measure of social origins, it is important not to overgeneralize; however, one might speculate that color differences are more closely tied to social origin than are differences in racial categories. It is perhaps also interesting to note that indigenous differences were particularly poorly explained by maternal education, and that there was relatively little variation in the degree to which maternal education accounted for race gaps (Panama being the exception), while there was more variation in the degree to which social origins accounted for the color gradient. Again, while it is important not to overgeneralize, one might speculate that the relationship between social origins and inequality along the underlying color continuum is much more variegated than the relationship between racial inequality and social origin. That is, perhaps there is

[10] As we discuss further below, Telles (2014) reports similar findings on the obfuscating effect of racial categories for understanding racial inequality in several countries of Latin America.

more agreement across countries in what racial categories mean, and how they are related to social origins, than in what color means.

Do our findings support Banton in his critiques of Latin American scholarship and in his suppositions regarding the U.S., or do scholars of Latin America appear to better understand social inequality in relation to color and race in those societies? Banton's assertion of the appropriateness of a color scale over racial categories in Latin America depends on what country you examine and for what purpose. If it is to capture meaningful variation in household income, our findings suggest he is correct in some contexts (e.g., in Mexico), but clearly not in others (like Honduras). The same can be said regarding Wade's (2012) assertion that racial categories in Latin America are more powerful than skin color for understanding social stratification. He may be right regarding race categories in Costa Rica, where Figure 3 shows a clear hierarchical ordering of white racial group privilege, but where Figure 1 shows that a color scale fails to map that inequality.

However, our take-away cannot be that everyone is partially right and partially wrong. Instead, what seems to be the case is that these scholars may be "talking past one another," appearing to disagree when they actually may agree more than they believe. In fact, it may be one of Telles' (2012) positions that can bring the discussion into greater clarity. Telles does view "race" as an appropriate conceptual tool, but perhaps in a more complex and nuanced way then Banton asserts. Telles' foundational argument is not that skin color and racial categories are necessarily interchangeable. Instead, his scholarship in the last two decades has emphasized race as a multidimensional construct that accommodates both racial categories and color scales. He first showed this multidimensional dynamic most clearly in his 1998 exploration of how it matters for socio-economic outcomes

who classifies the color or race: the interviewee or the interviewer (Telles and Lim 1998). He found that other-classification was associated with higher estimates of social inequality than self-classification. Indeed, he showed that the way individuals view themselves does not always coincide with how others view them. He concluded that the interviewer's evaluation was more important for understanding what we label racial inequality because it represents what many believe is at the root of that inequality: discrimination by outward appearance through societal preferences for lighter skin colors.

What's more, most recently, because of that interest in skin color as a dimension of race, he led research adopting a skin color scale for the first time in national samples across Latin America (see Telles 2014). Based on a set of results from analyzing these data, he now uses the concept pigmentocracies to understanding the operation of color scales in Latin America. One of his major conclusions in his new book entitled *Pigmentocracies* (Telles 2014), in fact, is that skin color does a better job of explaining social inequality in the eight countries of Latin America he addresses than do racial categories (pp. 223-228). In this, then, he is in complete harmony with Banton: both believe a color scale better fits in Latin America for the analysis of racial inequality.

Of course, agreement on that foundational issue does not solve all disputes, but it could enable clearer dialogue. The value of "race" as an overarching concept, though, is still in dispute. It would seem that at the crux of the discussion, though, may not be the use of racial categories or skin color in quantitative analyses of inequality. Rather, it may be contrasting beliefs in the necessity of discrete notions of race for collective mobilization and race-targeted policy redress that is heating up the debate (Wade 2012; Guimarães 2012).

Several issues however, are still pending empirical analysis, and this is where we hope to contribute to the debate. First of all, our analysis offers a robust wider view of skin color and racial categories in Latin America, and does so in explicit contrast to the US. Hence, we have been able to engage the debate comparatively. Whether the two systems of social stratification are converging over time is beyond our analysis (see, e.g., Daniel 2006), but what we do show is that currently they are more similar than different, and that there is no homogenous Latin American model. In addition, our methods enable us to explore the specific question of the relative contribution of the intergenerational transmission of social status to inequality along racial categories and color scales in the U.S. and in 18 countries of Latin America. That is, are race effects more the legacy of historical disadvantage being passed down from parents to children in the US, whereas color is tied to a more complex interrelation with other ascribed and achieved characteristic continually rearticulating the color continuum and its relationship to social status in Latin America? We find little evidence that the US is unique, either in the race gaps or color gradients. At the same time, though, we found high levels of variation in the degree to which social origins differentially account for the color gradient. With the exception of Panama, we find little variation in the degree to which maternal education accounts for inequality between racial categories.

Hence, our research should reorient the field in at least two ways: First, instead of centering on differences between the U.S. and Latin America and debating racial categories versus color scales, we should focus on expanding our tool kit to clarify the persistent and cross-national connection of “race” to social inequality. Secondly, our research suggests the important role of social class origins in mediating the effects of color, but not racial categories. Hence, as

scholars of racial and ethnic dynamics, we need to get beyond an either/or question on whether it is race or class creating social inequality and focus on their interrelation. This pursuit may be especially instructive in those anomalous contexts, like Panama, where we demonstrate substantial variation of parental class effect by racial category.

Conclusion

Commenting on evidence of the significance of color in the United States, Banton (2012a: 1109) writes, “Though there is no properly comparable evidence from other countries, there appears to be a widespread tendency for any negative valuation of darker skin color to be incorporated into a scale of socio-economic status.” We believe that we have here presented confirming evidence of the negative effects of skin color in the United States and comparatively in most of Latin America. Racial hierarchy based on white advantage is also clear in both contexts. These overarching findings, of course, do not negate the important nuances we document. One might conclude that advances in the quantitative analysis of social inequality and an increasing awareness of the need to adopt a multidimensional approach whenever possible hold substantial promise for more deeply unmasking the power of “race.”

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Figure 1.

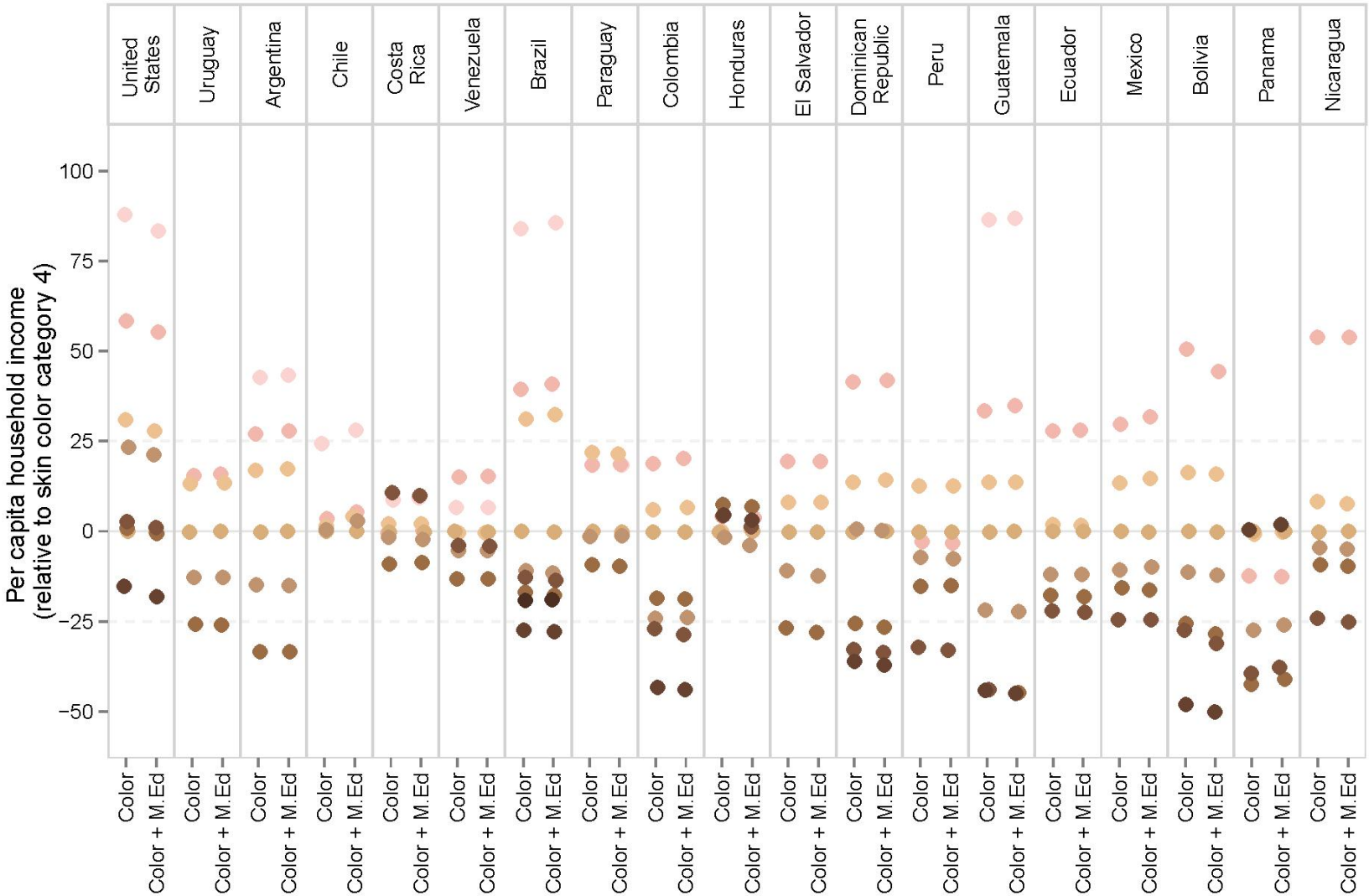

Per capita household income
(relative to skin color category 4)
100
75
50
25
0
−25
−50
United States
Uruguay
Argentina
Chile
Costa Rica
Venezuela
Brazil
Paraguay
Colombia
Honduras
El Salvador
Dominican Republic
Peru
Guatemala
Ecuador
Mexico
Bolivia
Panama
Nicaragua
Color
Color + M.Ed

Figure 2.

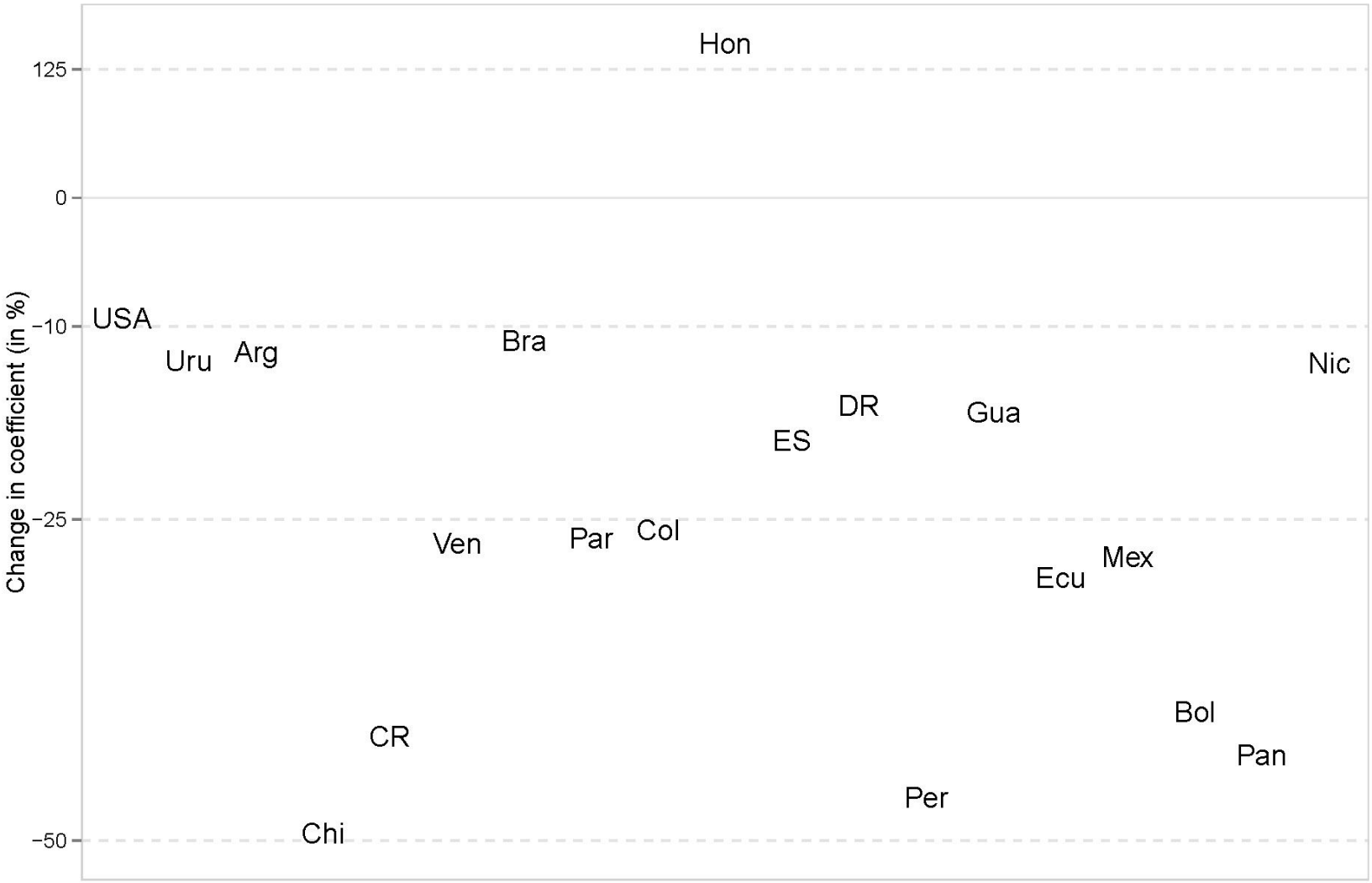

Change in coefficient (in %)
125
0
−10
−25
−50
Hon
USA
Uru
Arg
Bra
Nic
DR
Gua
ES
Ven
Par
Col
Mex
Ecu
Bol
Pan
CR
Per
Chi

Figure 3.

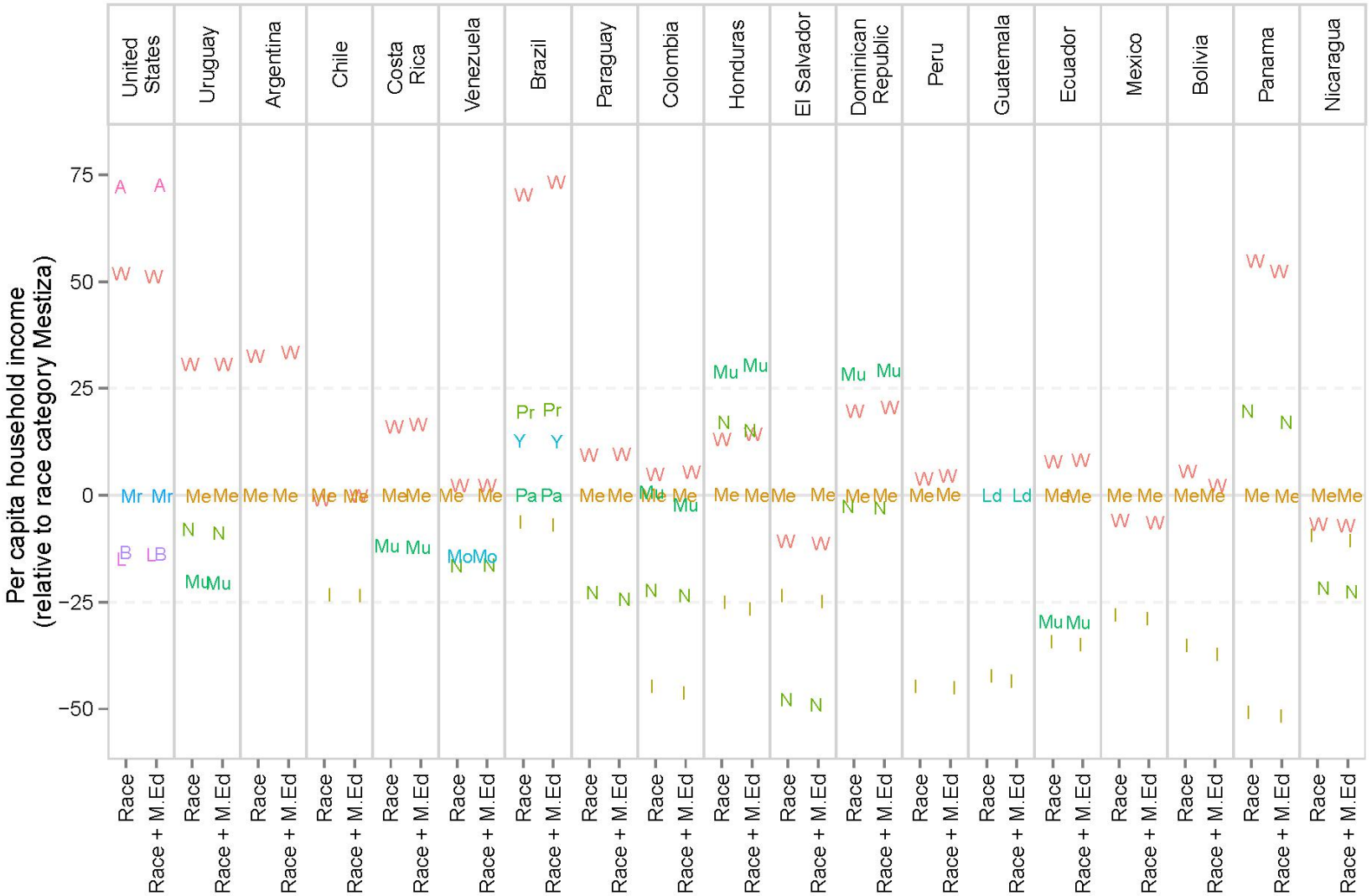
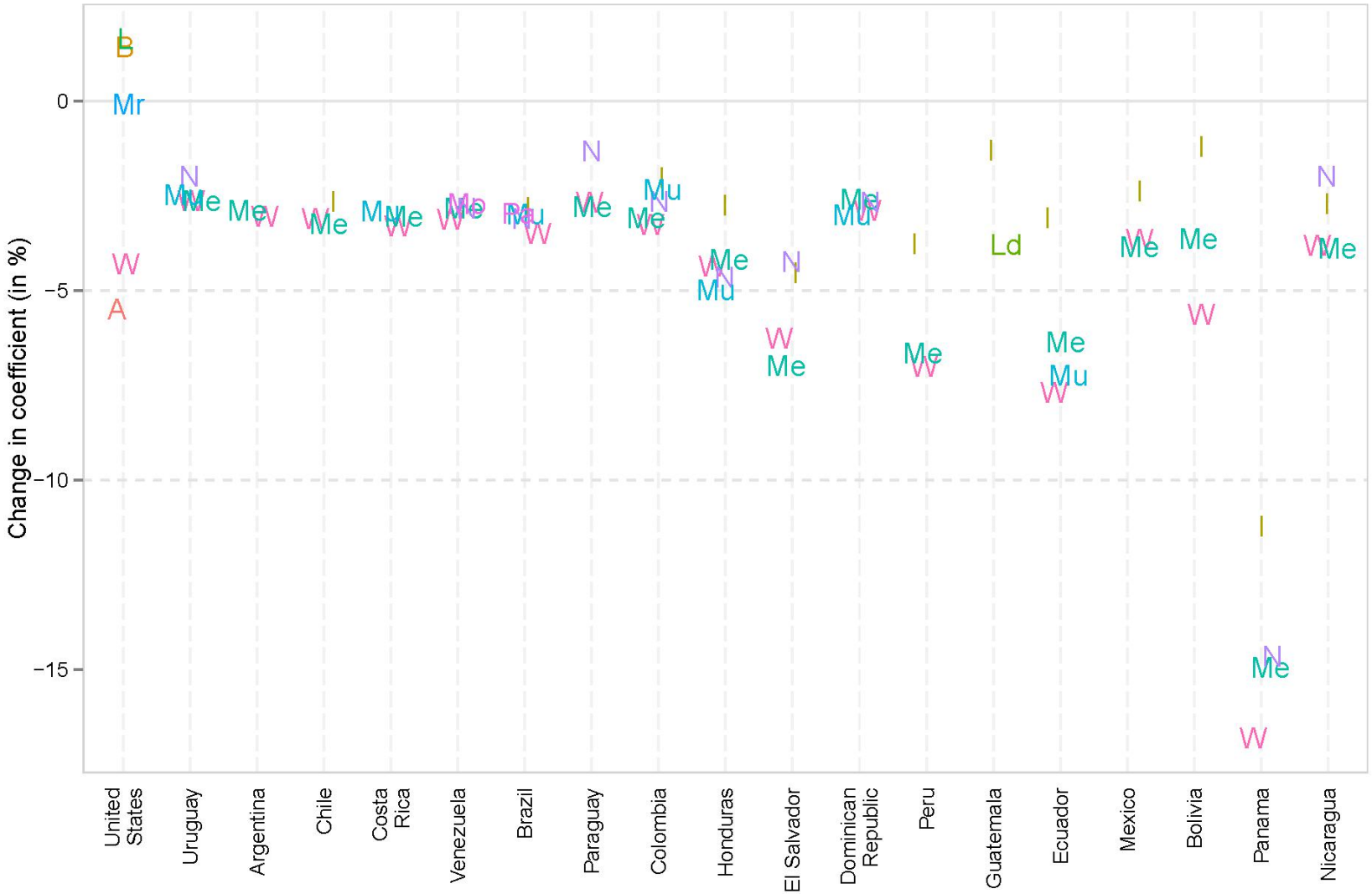

Per capita household income
(relative to race category Mestiza)
75
50
25
0
−25
−50
United States
Uruguay
Argentina
Chile
Costa Rica
Venezuela
Brazil
Paraguay
Colombia
Honduras
El Salvador
Dominican Republic
Peru
Guatemala
Ecuador
Mexico
Bolivia
Panama
Nicaragua
Race
Race + M.Ed

Figure 4.


Change in coefficient (in %)
0
−5
−10
−15
United States
Uruguay
Argentina
Chile
Costa Rica
Venezuela
Brazil
Paraguay
Colombia
Honduras
El Salvador
Dominican Republic
Peru
Guatemala
Ecuador
Mexico
Bolivia
Panama
Nicaragua